

Commandant's House
Navy Yard
Washington, D. C.

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of Washington, D. C.
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Historic American Buildings Survey
Delos H. Smith, District Officer
1707 Eye Street, N. W., Washington, D.C.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

THE NAVY YARD COMMANDANT'S HOUSE, (Quarters A).

Location: East of main gate and South of M Street, S. E., on the Drill Field of the Navy Yard, Washington, D. C.

Present Owner: The United States Navy.

Present Occupant: The Commandant of the Washington Navy Yard.

Present Use: Residence.

Significance: This residence was built near 1801 as The Commandant's House of the Washington Navy Yard. It was built by Captain Thomas Tingey, the first Yard Commandant, and has continuously served as the Commandant's House since then, though much changed.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The two-and-a-half story Commandant's House at the Washington Navy Yard was built near 1801 as a part of the initial development of the Yard as this Nation's most important naval installation. Though the house was not large, it was added to and kept its formal air in spite of considerable remodelling. The house had a Victorian flavor in the 1960's, but the original fabric showed physical evidence of having been quite Georgian.

The Navy Yard was begun at the first part of the Nineteenth Century and a good part of the work was carried out under the direction of Captain Thomas Tingey, in whose honor this plaque was placed on the side of the house,

"Captain Thomas Tingey, U.S.N.
Who for almost half a century
Served his country as an officer of the Navy
He laid out the Navy Yard
and for twenty-eight years
Was its First Commandant."

Captain Tingey who died on February 23, 1829, saw the Navy Yard through good times and bad. The house called "Quarters A" or the "Commandant's House," and the "Second Officer's House" or Quarters B" dated from the earliest days of the Navy Yard, both survive to the present, but were stripped and plundered during the War of 1812, when the hardware was taken along with all of the furnishings, by the people of Washington. At

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this time as the British were overrunning Washington and burning the Capitol and White House, an order was given the Commandant to evacuate and burn the yard. Though most of the yard was burned during this adventure, either by the Americans or the British, the two houses and the gate remained standing. Even though the houses and the gate have been much changed, they have been in continuous use to the present time.

The name of the Navy Yard and the function have changed from time to time, but it has remained the property of the United States Navy and has been in continuous operation as a Navy base. The Commandant's House and the Second Officer's House have likewise remained in operation according to their respective functions to the present time. The main gate, which is just west of the Commandant's House has been greatly expanded to include many functions aside from its initial guard functions. The Commandant's house has served about sixty different Commandants.

The Commandant's House was originally described as a small, formal four bedroom house, and it is suggested often that there was an intent to replace it with a larger structure, possibly by the architect, Benjamin Latrobe. The house was constructed as a main block with a central stair hall and one or two rooms on each side, with three or four bedrooms on the second floor and an attic floor. There is no existing surface evidence of a basement kitchen, so this function probably was taken care of in an outbuilding from the first. The main block of the house has a series of additions and wings that run back to the main M Street wall of the Yard. These wings range from one to two floors and are of brick with gable roofs like the main house, these contain kitchen and service rooms. Many of the features of the wings seem to be mid-19th Century, and most maps of the Navy Yard from this period show the wings in the present shape and disposition. It is difficult to tell from physical evidence which wings were built first, but it is quite likely that there was a series of independent structures incorporated in the whole. The dining room wing was originally a one floor wing, but was later extended to two floors. To the front and east side of the house are glassed-in porches and carport which are not original. These additions along with alterations of the original double hung sash and painting the house yellow with brown trim create Victorian character, with scrollwork and much ornament. Surface evidence shows that the house originally was much simpler without the front porch. It probably had a simple stoop. There were exterior shutters and somewhat simpler trim, thus giving the house, without the yellow-brown paint, a very Georgian character. Under the existing porch there is physical evidence of an older porch and cellar stair on the east side of the main house. These precede the existing stairs and may have been original. There is little or no documentation of these changes, some of which no doubt occurred after the War of 1812.

Each Commandant has had some freedom to make changes, thus the present character, which is shared by the main gate and those structures to its west.

The architect of the Commandant's House is really unknown, though there has been much speculation that it was Benjamin Latrobe. This is possible but not likely. Stylistically the original house had the characteristics of many buildings of the early 1800's. Similarities can be found in the use of semi-circular, Palladian and fan-light windows between the Commandant's House, the White House by Hoban, St. John's Church by Latrobe and many others.

Had the Commandant's House been designed by Benjamin Latrobe the interior would have probably been more dynamic. Latrobe did, in fact work at the Navy Yard, but not until 1803. By then both Quarters A and B were in existence. There is no actual documentation and no drawing to suggest that Latrobe did design the Commandant's house that stands. There is such evidence for his other designs for the Navy Yard.

In Talbot Hamlin's book B. H. Latrobe he states that, "The old Commandant's House was close to the northern boundary and east of the entrance, a second good house, also built before Latrobe's appointment, existed not far away from the eastern line. To these the architect planned to add another and better home for the Commandant west of the entrance..." If this is true it may be the origin of the theory that Latrobe designed the Commandant's House. Hamlin also states, "The two old houses still stand, much altered, but neither of them was designed by Latrobe though he may have carried out some decorative work in them." If this interior decoration was carried out by Latrobe, it is little in evidence today, because most interior features in both houses are Victorian or later.

Some of Latrobe's work can be seen at the Navy Yard Gate. Though the structure stands three and four floors high now and has addition upon addition, the original was probably only one floor high and contained the gate and guard houses on each side. The original structure would have been quite simple with an ashlar look. The front or M Street side had two masonry end blocks and a center opening divided in three by two free standing Doric columns. This would have been topped by a simple cornice and there was to have been an eagle and anchor decoration in the center at the top. This may have been on the inside, however. From the inside the gate had a low powerful brick arch for the main opening which was flanked by two small arched openings in the soft stone and pavilions. This design is almost identical to the design of the main gate for the Richmond Penitentiary by Latrobe, ea. 1797.

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Neither Quarters A nor B have any such easily traceable connection to Benjamin Latrobe. Quarters A, or the Commandant's House is a definite residential building, designed and built on a Georgian theme. It has also been remodelled on a central theme, a Victorian one. Quarters B is not so clear cut a case, but probably dates from before Quarters A, and possibly before the Navy Yard, as a humble structure about one third its present size.

Further specific information on the Commandant's House may be lying dormant in Government records somewhere. These sources have not yet been located in spite of efforts by the Navy. It is possible that information concerning the building of the House was lost during the fires in the War of 1812, however, much general information is available on the Navy Yard in many forms. One specific history of the Navy Yard is ROUND SHOT TO ROCKETS by Taylor-Peck. Talbot Hamlin's BENJAMIN HENRY LATROBE also gives an account of the construction of the Navy Yard. A quick and comprehensive history of the Navy Yard is given in the Federal Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration, American Guide Series, WASHINGTON CITY AND CAPITAL. This source attributes the Commandant's House and Quarters B to Latrobe, which as mentioned above is probably not true.

Prepared: Donald B. Myer
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Washington, D. C.
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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The Washington Navy Yard Commandant's House is a very well kept two-and-a-half floor brick gable roofed Victorian structure built about 1801 just east of the main yard gate and continuously used for the residence of the post commander. Though the house has many additions and dependencies, its main block is simple. The structure originally was Georgian in character, but successive remodellings have rendered it a Victorian composite. The architect and exact dates of construction and remodelling are unknown.

The exterior of the Commandant's House is yellow painted brick, with dark brown trim. The roof is grey slate. The house has a grand scale with high openings and symmetrical massing. The front of the house faces south toward the Yard Drill Field, and the rear dependencies of the house run north to the M Street wall of the Yard. The front has a continuous glassed-in porch which wraps around the east side of the building. In the center front is a carport and entry with a drive running through. The character of the glassed porches and the carport is Victorian, with scrollwork, extreme vertically on the support columns and ornamental drips. The complex of porches becomes two stories high on the east side of the building, with some areas enclosed with wood siding. From the physical evidence under these porches, there seems to have been a side porch on the east to the existing porches. This may have been original.

The second floor of the front is less changed than much of the house. Here it becomes obvious that the facade was designed to have a central pavilion in low relief and two side wings. The central pavilion is articulated out in front of the wings by about six inches, and the roof-line breaks, forming a pediment, or gable, over the central portion. The second floor windows are extremely tall with four over four light double hung sash, that may not be original. The window trim is simple on the sides and the sill is flat. The heads have flat stone arches with scroll keystones. The center window on the second floor is of the Palladian type, the entire assembly of which is no higher than standard windows. The Palladian window has a simple molded head and a diminished keystone of the same pattern as the standard windows. The cornice above the second floor and around the pediment of the central pavilion, as well as on the sides of the house, is made up of pairs of ornamental brackets mounted on a flat molding. In the pediment is a semi-circular window with a molded surround supported by a pair of brackets. On either side of the pediment is a dormer which is not original. Center multi-potted chimneys complete the ends of the house.

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The main block of the Commandant's House follows the above description and the utility wings follow similar lines with more simplicity. The main block is 58 by 32 feet and the wings extend 56 feet further back to the M Street Yard Wall. The wings are of a variety of sizes and shapes, but are all painted yellow with brown or black trim. Some of the windows have flat heads and some have brick low arched heads. Most windows are a variety of sizes and light double hung. There are some casement type windows over the Dining Room. All of these dependencies are now connected, but there is indication that some parts were independent at one time and were connected later. Maps made of the Navy Yard in the mid-1850's show all of the wings in their present disposition. Surface evidence places the ages of most areas in the mid-1850's. The hardware, doors and construction techniques are typical of service structures of this age. There are similarities between the service elements of the Timothy Caldwell House in Washington, D. C., and the Commandant's House. Both are of about the same period and type. One room was added to the northwest of the main block in the Victorian manner and connected on the interior by a large archway to a main room. On the northeast of the main block the Dining Room is a wing with a later second floor. To the rear of the Dining Room are several other rooms contained in a two-story wing, with several enclosed porches to its west. This area incorporates the Yard Wall as its northern extremity. Blocked gun ports are visible in certain sections of this wall. Several small and independent looking structures have been connected to the east and along the wall. Some areas have been covered with wood siding, but most are brick. The roofs are slate, and painted metal.

The house is situated in a well kept section of the Navy Yard with very carefully tended grounds. Just to the west of the house is the Latrobe gate and beyond that stretches a street of residences for high ranking Navy officers. Across the street from the house is the manacured drill ground. Southeast of the house is Quarters B or the Second Officer's House, also very well kept. To the north and east of the house runs the Navy Yard wall. In front of the house are a U-shaped drive and a small planting area with a fountain and pool. The whole is enclosed on the public side by a high ornamental wrought iron fence with a pair of gates for each end of the drive. To the east of the house is a formal garden with walks and benches. At the north end of the garden and northeast of the house along the M Street wall is a greenhouse. The complex and gardens cover about an acre.

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The interior of the house has plaster walls and ceilings with wood floors. Many of the floors have narrow board floors that were added over the original floors. Some of the bathrooms and utility areas have asphalt tile floors. The main first floor hall and the glassed porches also have composition tile floors. The front of the house is exposed on the interior of the enclosed porches, making these walls brick.

The main block of the house has a central stair hall with a large formal room to the west and a formal room to the east, the rear portion of which side has a transverse hall. The west room has two fireplaces and is connected to an added Victorian room by a large arch. Much of trim in this main room is not original, as is true of the rest of the house. The fireplaces have simple Colonial mantels that were installed in the 1940's. The room has a decorative molded plaster cornice which may predate the rest of the trim. The room on the east side of the hall is smaller, but similar to this. It has an older Victorian fireplace with a low arched opening. Most of the first and second floor rooms of the main house have the same door and window trim which consists of a broad wood molding of a type common to the mid-19th Century. In place of the usual corner blocks, however, which were probably removed, are quadrants of the same molding above and below. These quadrant blocks round the top corners of the doors and windows with the molding lines. A transverse hall behind the east room has a doorway with the original corner blocks still in place. To the rear of the east room is the dining room wing which contains that room and a side hall and back stair. The dining room has a molded plaster cornice and patterned chandelier rosette. The cornice mold has a double egg and dart pattern. The dining room fireplace is a large rectangular one with black veined marble and a cast iron Victorian coal fire grate. The base mold in all of the first floor main rooms is simple but deep. There are chair rails of a much daintier type. These main rooms have interior shutters, though the house originally had exterior shutters.

The main entrance for the house is through the carport and the glassed porch to the center hall. The double glazed doors to the main house do not seem to be original. The arched opening above the doors has been divided in half and glazed, rather than the expected fan light. There is a more ornamental semi-circular window or fan light out farther from the front in the glassed porch. This may have been moved from the main door out at the time of remodeling. The arch of the doorway is molded and has a keystone in the manner of the Palladian Window above it.

Most of the interior doors in the house are of the six panel wooden variety, though there is quite a variety of hardware. That in the main house is brass and possibly 20th-Century. The utility areas of the house have a variety of 19th-Century hardware with china and composition knobs.

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The service wings of the Commandant's House are devoted to kitchen, storage and staff living. Some areas have been finished in modern dry-wall, and some mechanical equipment has been installed for cooking and laundry functions.

The second floor of the main house contains four rooms, two to the east and two to the west of the stair hall. Each pair of bedrooms is inter-connected by a broad doorway and double doors. Three of the rooms have low arched Victorian Fireplaces of slate or marble with vegetable designs. The fourth room has had its fireplace removed. From the exterior of the house there has been a window blocked up directly between the two west bedrooms, the partition of which falls right on the blocked window, indicating that this area was differently arranged at one time. Most of these rooms have had closets added in them. There are porches opening off of the two east bedrooms, one has been made into a dressing room and one to a bathroom.

The second floor over the dining room is not original, but has been made into a bathroom and a series of small storage rooms. To the rear or north of this and against the M Street wall is another bedroom. Over one of the other dependencies is a small independently reached servants room.

The third floor of the main house has a center hall with one bedroom to the east and one to the west. Both of these rooms have dormers and closets that are not original. At the front of the house the third floor center hall has a tiny room inside of the pediment.

The basement of the house has a series of rooms that were not all present at the time the house was built. There is much partial excavation, low doors, irregular walls, etc. There is no sign of any kitchen function. To the center of the west wall of the main house is a blocked up cellar stair and to the center of the east side of the basement are signs that the existing exterior stair was moved from the south to the north of the original east porch. The basement has an interior stair under the main center stair.

The main stair from the first floor center hall to the third floor. It is a dark heavy Victorian featured stair, with some scrollwork on the ends of the stairs. The rear stair has cherry treads and runs to the second floor.

The house is heated by radiators and has electric lights. There is one sign that there were gas lights in the house at one time. The house is air conditioned by a variety of window and floor units.

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The structure has been very well maintained to the present time and there are no signs on the surface that the house has had structural failure or fire damage. The interior is furnished with a variety of period pieces and is an operative Commandant's House with staff and kitchens to perform ceremonial functions.

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